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ABSTRACT

Workplace literacy has been a recent addition to the field of literacy education and research, achieving a level of "commonsense" acceptability so that its meaning(s) or constructions have largely gone unchallenged. A study, therefore, explored the concepts of "work," "workers," and "literacy," not so much to establish what "are" the relationships among these concepts, but to understand the importance of "how" particular groups, and the broader community, define and act on their understandings of these relationships in response to contemporary economic and political climates. The study, using two sites of discourse, a bureaucratic report, and a series of interviews with key stakeholders in the field of workplace literacy, applied analytic procedures derived from poststructuralism and applied ethnomethodology to identify and make explicit the discourses that form various social practices of "work," "workers," and "literacy." Findings revealed that (1) the relationship between work and literacy is currently explained and understood in terms of the connections that can be made between contemporary discourses on work and the dominant functional discourse of history; (2) particular conceptualizations of literacy at work that derive from this juncture are inappropriate and ineffective in giving a full account of literacy, work, and workers; (3) current theorizations of workplace literacy have significant impact on the ways in which people establish their identities as workers, and on how others create the identities of workers; and (4) reformulated understandings of workplace literacy are essential for the achievement of individual and societal goals. (Contains an 80-item bibliography). (NKA)

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Virtual and virtuous realities of workplace literacy

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Introduction

The title of this paper, in the first instance comes from the work of Dorothy Smith (1987, 1990) who wrote that many of what she called institutional texts establish "relations of ruling" that, in turn, create a "virtual reality" that comes about through distinctive patterns of reading and writing such texts (Smith, 1990:62). The second notion of "virtuous realities" is grounded in the work of Lena Jayyusi (1988, 1991) an ethnomethodologist, who is particularly concerned with the moral foundations of social order that become 'reconstituted and reestablished as "grounds" for accountable, rational, intelligible actions, inference and judgement within discourse' (Jayyusi, 1991:236). These two concepts help to characterize the theoretical framework employed to examine the question "How is workplace literacy socially described?".

A reading of the history of literacy, based on Graff's assertion that such activity must expose its "continuities and contradictions", shows literacy, since formalised as part of compulsory schooling, as fulfilling a hegemonic role in the maintenance of social order. Current understandings of literacy at work, grounded in a functional literacy discourse and supported by the use of reductive metaphors, when aligned with practices of the "new work order", have established what Hull (1993, 1997) has named a popular discourse on literacy and work that focuses on the inadequate individual literacy competence of workers. According to Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996:102), however, these discourses of the "new work order" also constitute 'an overt form of hegemony in favor of the leaders and major stakeholders in the business'.

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Purpose

Workplace literacy has been a recent addition to the field of literacy education and research, achieving a level of "commonsense" acceptability

so that its meaning/s or constructions have largely gone unchallenged. This study therefore set out to explore the concepts of "work", "workers" and "literacy" not so much to establish what "are" the relationships between these concepts, but in order to understand the importance of "how" particular groups, and the broader community, define and act on their understandings of these relationships in response to contemporary economic and political climates.

Research Design

Operating within a theoretical framework that drew on poststructuralists' reformulated understandings of the nature of knowledge, and on theories of discourse, to examine the social construction of knowledge, the study applied analytic procedures derived from poststructuralism and applied ethnomethodology to identify and make explicit the discourses that form various social practices of "work", "workers" and "literacy". The study adopted a Foucaultian stance on discourses as socio-historical-political systems of knowledge and thought that become institutionalised and understood as natural or proper ways of knowing, understanding and talking about the world (Brodkey, 1992; McLaren, 1992; Pennycook, 1994). From this perspective discourses can be seen not only to *reflect* social reality but also to *produce* these realities. The project brought together ways of going about research into discourse that employ interpretive procedures to expose how members of a society produce and maintain a sense of social and moral order.

Data sources

Two sites of discourses on workplace literacy were examined: the text *Words at Work: A Report on Literacy Needs in the Workplace* (1991) that documents the outcomes of a nine month inquiry into literacy needs in the workplace undertaken Australia wide in 1990. This government report that deals exclusively with the relationship between literacy and the national economic agenda becomes an appropriate source for determining what is deemed by society to constitute knowledge about the relationship between "work", "workers" and "literacy". Secondly, a series of interviews with key stakeholders in the field of workplace literacy were analysed as displays of cultural particulars that are grounded in given patterns of social organisation (Silverman, 1985, 1993). The study documented how certain attributes, knowledge and assumptions are attached, often by implication, to

categories of people, and how these attributes, knowledge and assumptions open certain avenues for understanding and practice with respect to key concepts central to the project.

Data Analysis

Bureaucratic texts such as *Words at Work (1991)* mediate social relations in particularly powerful ways (Freebody & Baker, 1996:155). The production of factual accounts, in the form of documents like *Words at Work* (1991), are essential to the operation and regulation of organisations including governments, though such knowledge of society mediated through these texts can, and should, be treated as problematic (Smith, 1990:67).

In order to expose what may be described as "problems" with the text the document was viewed first of all from a poststructuralist perspective that, in McWilliam's (1994) terms offers a grid for the reading of culture. This approach supports Foucault's interest in 'examining the methods, practices and techniques by which official discourses go about [the] process of normalisation' (McHoul & Grace, 1993:17). Drawing heavily on the work of Derrida (1970, 1982), the analytic practice of deconstruction effectively dismantled those contrivances, carefully naturalised within the text, that work to confirm the document as a legitimate authority on literacy in the workplace. That part of the poststructuralist reading that examined the use of figurative language devices in the document to determine how they communicated intentional and unintentional meanings about "work", "workers" and "literacy" (Fiske, 1990; Barton, 1994; Ilsley & Stahl, 1994), was held over till the nature and consequence of membership categorization work achieved in the document had first been examined.

Membership categorization analysis, based on the work of Garfinkel (1967); Sacks (1972, 1984); Heritage (1984), Eglin and Hester (1992, 1997), and Jayyusi (1984, 1991), was carried out on both the document and the interview talk. Membership categories and their logic of use are powerful resources because they can 'organise our perceptions, knowledge, beliefs, discourse and other forms of practical conduct in thoroughly routine, expectable, conventional, in a word, orderly ways' (Coulter, 1991:47).

The first step of the membership categorization analysis (MCA) involved locating the central categories (of people, places or things) that underpin

the text and talk. This task also required acknowledgment of those categories that were constituted through implication rather than by naming. The next step involved identifying the attributions that are made to each of the categories, with again, attention to those that may be just "hinted" at rather than stated. The final step comprised an examination of the categories and attribution connections that members produce between "cultural particulars" (Baker, 1997b:144), to detect the courses of social action that are implied. These procedures showed how a particular social and moral order has been established in and by the kinds of categories and category-bound activities through which people (workers) were represented. Baker (1997b:144) has described the 'artful production of plausible versions [of the social world] using recognizable membership categorization devices [as] a profoundly important form of cultural competence.'

Results and Discussion

Constructing the work of words at work

The report *Words at Work : Literacy Needs in the Workplace*, released in 1991, formed part of the then federal Australian Labor government's agenda, or "metapolicy" of "corporate federalism" (Bartlett et al, 1992), aimed at bringing about significant changes in Australian industries, making them globally more competitive, as well as at reforming vocational education and training policy to improve the quality and flexibility of existing systems for a better skilled and adaptable workforce. It also constitutes part of the Australian counterpart of Darrah's (1992) "future workplace skills literature" in which literacy has been constructed as a functional, employment skill closely tied to the nation's economic progress and productivity.

In its role as offering "official knowledge" and being part of the discourse of government, on a subject deemed as important for, and by, the government of the day, the document set out to 'instruct its readers in how to see the world [of work]; how to differentiate the parts within it and thereby provides the means by which we engage with [that] world' (Prior, 1997:67). Within the text certain official, authoritative "ways of knowing" literacy at work have been created and presented as logical, natural and becoming preferred ways of knowing, by calling on their "commonsense-

ness" appeal. This framing has consequential effects on those who are constituted and positioned in that discourse of policy, with Luke and colleagues (1993:14) describing this positioning as becoming 'an actual act of power and regulation over those very subjects in the world' - these texts create the "relations of ruling", a virtual reality about and for its subjects. The version of reality thus created has the potential to work for and against those categories of people constituted through the document's "relations of ruling" (Smith, 1987,1990).

The document draws on powerful discourses on work and literacy to establish new attributions for those categorised as workers for contemporary workplaces. As a consequence of this work, many workers are now characterised with a range of attributes that determine them as inadequately skilled, and on that count, held responsible for the nation's poor economic performance both at home and in the international marketplace.

Within the report there is no attempt to situate responsibility for poor worker performance within the very sites where work takes place. Workplaces are presented as similarly-constructed sites, separate and separable from the people, or at least the "workers", who inhabit them. Neither is there any evidence presented that worker performance could, or would, improve without some form of intervention that did not include literacy training. Workers are not attributed with the capacity to improve their skills either through self-motivation or self-education.

Powerful categories of people (skilled and unskilled workers) as well as powerful institutional settings (workplaces, government) are carefully instituted in the text. The purpose of the analysis of the interview data was to document in a principled way the views of the informants with respect to these categories to determine points of agreement and contestation.

Constructing "Work', "Workers" And "Workplace Literacy" through talk

The interviewees drew on a cultural history of professional and community interpretations that they used to present talk they believed to be both meaningful and trustworthy. The interviews provided opportunities for them to give various accounts of the relationships they perceived between

"work", "workers" and "literacy". Certain hearing positions were offered to the interviewer but are also made available to a wider audience.

In order to achieve shared understandings and meanings, informants drew on well established categories within the membership categorization device (MCD) of work from commonly held discourses on how work was done in the past, as well from some more recent discourses emerging out of "new times" or a "new work order".

Working within the established categories emanating from traditional discourses on work enabled the informants to describe various ways in which certain workers were becoming a problem because they do not possess the characteristics that now need to be attributed to the category of "worker" within new, compelling discourses. The accounting practices succeeded in constituting and reproducing the institutional settings of which they are a fundamental and elementary part. The "known-in-common" world (Heritage, 1984:216) that emerged from the descriptions of the informants supported the one created through the document *Words at Work* (1991), that is, a world in which there is a problem in the contemporary workforce that has been created by "workers", and that this problem has dire consequences for society as a whole.

An over-riding perception gained from the literature, the document and the talk is one of workplaces as homogenous, mono-cultural and seamless sites where category membership and attribution is consonant and conforming. Within such workplaces problems are uniformly presented and, by implication, universal solutions equally applicable.

The ascribed correlation between inferior work performance and low literacy skill was realised in the talk by recourse to a complex set of causal relations. These relations are representative of an institutional perspective, and sustained by what Garfinkel (1984:216) called a "swarm" of indirect elaborative practices 'through which some focal event of entity [poor literacy performance] is sustained as, simultaneously, the presupposition, process and reflexive product of those practices'. Invariably inferior work accomplishment was explained in terms of level of literacy skill that was then related to an intricate pattern of culturally defined attributes relating to ethnicity, cognitive or personality deficiency, experiences of schooling and socio-economic status. The

assembly of workers with a specific range of cultural attributes thus allowed for the formulation of taken-for-granted propositions that informants applied in their explanations of the causes and effects of inferior, or "less than quality" worker accomplishment.

According to the accounts offered, the extent to which certain adults are able to carry out their responsibilities as "workers" is the extent to which they are literate. The category of worker with poor literacy skills identifies workers as not adequately skilled and provides a basis for explaining why the economy is performing badly at local, industry and international levels, without attaching any responsibility to other stakeholders such as management, industry and the government.

The workplace itself was rarely named by the informants as playing a role in workers' literacy achievement or their consequent poor work performance, such that more organisationally-based problems that have to do with how work is organised, and with what work processes are valued were not heard. The part played by the workplace, as offered in the talk, is to build upon already instituted versions of a set of cultural and social experiences that workers bring to today's work environment. From this perspective blame cannot be placed with workplaces, or by connotation, with "management" or anyone else, for workers' poor literacy skills and their ensuing inability to be "good" or "quality" workers in these new times.

The phenomenon of poor literacy at work, or what is meant by "workplace literacy", has been created by the calling up of particular culturally available categories of persons and their respective practices. More than pure definition work is accomplished through such accounting endeavours, however. These accounts represent taken-for-granted ways of thinking about and explaining aspects of the social world beyond the domain of the workplace, and that accounting is partly moral in its consequences. A notable feature of the literature, the document, and the talk of the key informants is the moral ordering that the "new" workplace embodies. Workers are ascribed roles that extend beyond their workplaces to include responsibility for their country's economic wellbeing. The degree of their literacy competence, that is resolved to be a consequence of factors beyond the world of work, is strongly denoted in this moral order. Workers who have poor literacy skills can be held morally accountable for

the nation's inabilities to produce quality goods and trade competitively and profitably in the international marketplace.

Findings & Implications

The study has established that:

(1) The relationship between work and literacy is currently explained and understood in terms of the connections that can be made between contemporary discourses on work and the dominant functional discourse on literacy;

(2) The particular conceptualizations of literacy at work, or "workplace literacy", that derive from this juncture are inappropriate and ineffective in giving a full account of literacy, work and workers;

(3) Current theorisations of workplace literacy have significant impact on the ways in which people establish their identities as workers, and on how others create the identities of workers;

(4) Reformulated understandings of workplace literacy are essential for the achievement of individual and societal goals.

The interpretive moves employed in this project demonstrated how knowledge of workplace literacy has been socially constructed out of a range of prevailing discourses on work and on literacy. Out of this fusion of ideas a particular version of "workplace literacy" has received a preferred reading and hearing. However, the findings support the call by Hull (1993:44) to 'amend, qualify and fundamentally challenge the popular discourse on literacy and work, as there are significant omissions and silences in these contemporary understandings that do not allow for a proper account of workers, for how "literacy is made" at work, and its place in the everyday lives of all people.

Grounded as it is in other discourses that are themselves incomplete and flawed the dominant discourse on workplace literacy not only offers limited understandings of the inter-relationships existing between literacy and work, but also works to constitute and strengthen particular power relations within work settings and beyond. These findings reinforce

Foucault's (1980) contention that power and knowledge are interrelated and inseparable so that any field of knowledge constitutes at the same time certain power relations. Within the increasingly segregated workforce found in today's workplace, such formulations define some as winners and others as losers.

Contemporary discourses of work privilege a particular account of work that creates new social realities in workplaces. Within these workplaces great emphasis is placed on new discourse practices associated with new identities that are to be assumed by workers. The power structures constituted within these discourses become apparent, however, when it is realised that assuming these new identities exposes certain contradictory practices that, while seemingly serving all workers, may actually privilege a few at the expense of the many. The new discourses on work name those experiences considered to be important to contemporary society, establishing differentially valued discursive practices as they are displayed by some, thereby denying credibility and validity to the experiences of others. This realisation played out in worksites bears out Boyett and Conn's (1992:277) comment that 'the world itself is changing in respect to how and what type of human effort is valued'. The strong emphasis given to workers' skills within these discourses displays not only their heavy reliance on the functional literacy discourse in their descriptions of workers' literacy competence, but also their predilection to use binary oppositional structures to do their work. Within new discourses of work workers are typically categorised as "skilled" or "unskilled", with all the rewards on offer in the "enchanted workplace" (Gee, 1994; Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996) available to the skilled, and a bleak future for the "other", the unskilled.

Far richer, more meaningful formulations of literacy than those offered in the functional literacy discourse need to be applied to the context of work to fully appreciate the role literacy plays both for workers and for work. Particularly through the accounts of work offered by the informants, this current project demonstrated the rich interplay of communicative practices that do exist in workplaces, though they are not often given the legitimacy they deserve. This study showed evidence of workers' typically relying on other workmates, particularly in those tasks that involve some form of literacy, as they go about their jobs. This process is a fundamental part of social life both within and beyond workplaces that, rather than be

ignored, must be accommodated in our understandings of literacy and of work. There are examples in the literature of networks operating in workplaces that give a far more accurate representation of how work is actually achieved through the sharing of knowledge and skills rather than by individual performance (Gowen, 1992, 1994); Hull, (1992, 1997); Darrah, (1992, 1997); Castleton & Wyatt-Smith, (1995). These accounts allow for more positive metaphors to come into play that can capture more effectively the collective nature of work as well as account for how people may move in and out of particular roles as work is accomplished.

Implications For Workplace Literacy Policy and Practice

Understandings of workplaces as "communities of practice" would assist in reframing present concerns that centre on the individual skill level of workers. Recent work undertaken in Australia (Pearson et al, 1996) and the United States (Hull 1997) shows that a deficit model, grounded in the functional literacy discourse, still predominantly drives workplace literacy programs in those countries. While there is some evidence that such deficit approaches may result in improved performance in the short term (Pearson et al, 1996), Gowen (1994:134) has warned, however, that they do little to help organisations 'restructure themselves into more humane and democratic workplaces'. In addition, the results of this study may cast some doubt over the long-term benefits of such programs. As renditions of particular workers' performance in this study are framed around a coterie of cultural and material attributions, programs that do not account for these factors can never be seen to be truly successful. Curriculum and teaching and learning practices for workplaces must be developed that focus less on what we all have been socialised to think of in terms of traditional education and more on articulating the value of literacy in the lives of the workers to whom these efforts are addressed (Collins et al, 1989).

This task requires what Giroux (1988) has described as a "radical pedagogy" that calls for a reshaping and redefinition of various discourses around workplace literacy. A pedagogy must emerge that allows for and sustains the voices and experiences of workers as they interrogate workplace texts, social relations and practices to determine where and how they can, in Giroux's (1988:65) terms 'locate themselves in their own histories and in doing so make themselves present as actors'. Such an approach would then

extend the catchcry of "fast capitalist" texts of worker emancipation to give workers an authentic and authoritative say in their own destinies. Rather than working to establish the cultural conformity implicit in new discourses of work, workplace literacy programs need to attend more closely to the benefits of "productive diversity" that 'focuses on the dynamic relationship of differences in the establishment of common ground' (Cope & Kalantzis, 1997:16). In a time when "fast capitalist" texts emphasise the need for "knowledge" workers in contemporary workplaces, the questions of what knowledge, for whom, why, and in whose interests, emerge as being integral to on-going debates around workplace literacy.

All those involved in the field are therefore urged to inspect their own roles in this process. Just as workplace literacy programs can help workers move from a state of "naive " to "critical" consciousness (Freire, 1972), so too can those working in workplace literacy examine their own roles from a critical perspective to avoid becoming unwittingly implicated in educational projects perhaps not of their choosing (Lankshear, 1994:107).

The study has demonstrated how the very subjects of the enterprise of workplace literacy have been ill-represented in the various discourses operating about and on them. It therefore urges the re-consideration of aspects of the process followed by governments as they go about making and implementing policy. If such policies are to benefit all of society, then those responsible must make visible and scrutinise the ways in which certain forms of social knowledge are derived. The responsibility therefore rests with those in authority to work towards better ways of constituting policy so that it captures the voice, needs and involvement of those in whose interest it is being formulated.

Some of the earlier philosophical concerns that arose from adult literacy practitioners in Australia (e.g. Angwin, 1992; Lee & Wickert, 1994; Seddon, 1994), and no doubt in other places, about their changing roles in unstable working environments influenced by the economic rationalist discourses of government and business agendas, must remain uppermost as the future of workplace literacy is determined. Workplace literacy "work" must fulfil real purposes for all stakeholders, providing for all 'the means of grasping the social relations organizing the worlds of their experience' (Smith, 1987:153). Otherwise it runs the risk of becoming, in Foucault's (1980)

terms, a disciplinary discourse that sets out to legitimate and sustain certain forms of power/knowledge, while being deceptively presented as a "virtuous" response to workers' needs.

To return to the title of this paper, the "virtual realities" created for workers through discursive practices captured in text and talk, that have lead to "virtuous" concerns about, and responses to, workers' capabilities, were laid bare for scrutiny in this project. For those involved in the field, and who believe in the transformations in people's lives that Street (1997:13) has stated can be achieved through literacy, there are a number of lessons to be learnt as we continue to strive for realities that offer better choices for all concerned.

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